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ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

THE DRAMATIST

BY

ARTHUR WING PINERO

THE CRITIC COMPANY

27 and 29 West Twenty-third Street

NEW YORK

1903

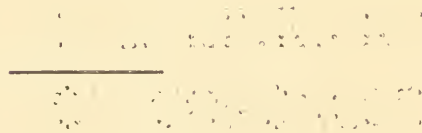


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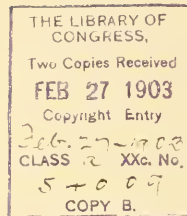
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Robert Louis Stevenson: The Dramatist

By ARTHUR WING PINERO

SOME, perhaps—and some, too, who would call themselves ardent Stevensonians—are scarcely aware that Robert Louis Stevenson was a dramatist at all, that he ever essayed the dramatic form. If I were to ask those who have read his three plays to hold up a hand, I fear the demonstration would not be a very considerable one; and that demonstration would be still less imposing, I think, if my question were to take this shape: "How many of you have seen one or other of these works upon the stage?" Yet it is a fact that Stevenson wrote, or at any rate actively collaborated in, three plays. Three plays? More—four, five. But two of the five I propose to disregard entirely. One, "The Hanging Judge," written in collaboration with Mrs. Stevenson, has never been published, and may therefore be regarded as exempt from criticism. The other, "Macaire," does not profess to be an original work except in details of dialogue. We will, therefore, with your permission, put that, also, aside and concentrate our attention on the three original plays—"Deacon Brodie," "Beau Austin," and "Admiral Guinea"—which Stevenson produced in collaboration with Mr. William Ernest Henley. Now, I wish to enquire why it is that these two men, both, in their different ways, of distinguished talent, combining, with great gusto and hopefulness, to produce acting dramas, should have made such small mark with them, either on or off the stage. "Deacon Brodie" was acted a good many times in America, but only once, I believe, in Great Britain. "Beau Austin" has been publicly presented some score of times; "Admiral Guinea" has enjoyed but a single performance. Nor have these pieces produced a much greater effect in the study, as the phrase goes. They have their admirers, of whom, in many respects, I am one. I hope to draw your attention, before we part this evening—if you will allow me to do so—to some of the sterling beau-

ties they contain. But no one, I think, gives even "Beau Austin" a very high place among Stevenson's works as a whole; and many people who have probably read every other line that Stevenson wrote, have, as I say, scarcely realized the existence of his dramas. Why should Stevenson the dramatist take such a back seat, if you will pardon the expression, in comparison with Stevenson the novelist, the essayist, the poet?

This question seems to me all the more worth asking because Stevenson's case is by no means a singular one. There is hardly a novelist or poet of the whole nineteenth century who does not stand in exactly the same position. They have one and all attempted to write for the stage, and it is scarcely too much to say that they have one and all failed, not only to achieve theatrical success but even, in any appreciable degree, to enrich our dramatic literature. Some people, perhaps, will claim Shelley and Browning as exceptions. Well, I won't attempt to argue the point—I will content myself with asking you what rank Shelley would have held among our poets had he written nothing but "The Cenci," or Browning if his fame rested solely on "Strafford" and "A Blot on the 'Scutcheon." For the rest, Scott, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats, all produced dramas of a more or less abortive kind. Some of Byron's plays, which he justly declared to be unsuited for the stage, were forced by fine acting and elaborate scenic embellishment into a sort of success; but how dead they are to-day! and how low a place they hold among the poet's works! Dickens and Thackeray both loved the theatre, and both wrote for it without the smallest success. Of Lord Tennyson's plays, two, "The Cup" and "Becket," in the second of which Sir Henry Irving has given us one of his noblest performances, were so admirably mounted and rendered by that great actor that they enjoyed con-

siderable prosperity in the theatre; but no critic ever dreamt of assigning either to them or to any other of Tennyson's dramas a place coequal with his non-dramatic poems. Mr. Swinburne has written many plays—has any one of them the smallest chance of being remembered along with "Poems and Ballads" and "Songs before Sunrise"? There is only one exception to the rule that during the nineteenth century no poet or novelist of the slightest eminence made any success upon the stage, and even that solitary exception is a dubious one. I refer, as you may surmise, to Bulwer Lytton. There is no doubt as to his success; but what does the twentieth century think of his eminence?

If we can lay our finger on the reason of Stevenson's—I will not say failure, but inadequate success—as a playwright, perhaps it may help us to understand the still more inadequate success of greater men.

And here let me follow the example of that agreeable essayist, Euclid, and formulate my theorem in advance—or, in other words, indicate the point towards which I hope to lead you. We shall find, I think, that Stevenson, with all his genius, failed to realize that the art of drama is not stationary, but progressive. By this I do not mean that it is always improving; what I do mean is that its conditions are always changing, and that every dramatist whose ambition it is to produce live plays is absolutely bound to study carefully, and I may even add respectfully—at any rate not contemptuously—the conditions that hold good for his own age and generation. This Stevenson did not—would not—do. We shall find, I think, that in all his plays he was deliberately imitating outworn models, and doing it, too, in a sportive, half-disdainful spirit, as who should say, "The stage is a realm of absurdities—come, let us be cleverly absurd!" In that spirit, ladies and gentlemen, success never was and never will be attained. I do not mean to imply, of course, that this was the spirit in which the other great writers I have mentioned—Shelley, Browning, Tennyson,

and the rest—approached their work as dramatists. But I do suggest that they one and all, like Stevenson, set themselves to imitate outworn models, instead of discovering for themselves, and if necessary ennobling, the style of drama really adapted to the dramatist's one great end—that of showing the age and body of the time his form and pressure. The difference is that while Stevenson imitated the transpontine plays of the early nineteenth century, most of the other writers I have named imitated the Elizabethan dramatists. The difference is not essential to my point—the error lies in the mere fact of imitation. One of the great rules—perhaps the only universal rule—of the drama is that you cannot pour new wine into old skins.

Some of the great men I have mentioned were debarred from success for a reason which is still more simple and obvious—namely, that they had no dramatic talent. But this was not Stevenson's case. No one can doubt that he had in him the ingredients of a dramatist. What is dramatic talent? Is it not the power to project characters, and to cause them to tell an interesting story through the medium of dialogue? This is *dramatic* talent; and dramatic talent, if I may so express it, is the raw material of *theatrical* talent. Dramatic, like poetic, talent is born, not made; if it is to achieve success on the stage, it must be developed into theatrical talent by hard study, and generally by long practice. For theatrical talent consists in the power of making your characters not only tell a story by means of dialogue, but tell it in such skilfully devised form and order as shall, within the limits of an ordinary theatrical representation, give rise to the greatest possible amount of that peculiar kind of emotional effect, the production of which is the one great function of the theatre. Now, dramatic talent Stevenson undoubtedly possessed in abundance; and I am convinced that theatrical talent was well within his reach, if only he had put himself to the pains of evolving it.

Need I prove the dramatic talent of

the author of "Prince Otto," "The Master of Ballantrae," "The Ebb-Tide," and "Weir of Hermiston"? If I once began reading scenes to demonstrate it, I should not know where to leave off. I prefer, then, to read you, not any single scene, but a whole drama which, as Stevenson assures us in his "Chapter on Dreams," came to him in the visions of the night. He is showing how his Little People—his Brownies, as he calls them; the Brownies of the brain—go on working in sleep, independently of the dreamer's volition, and how in his case they would sometimes hit upon strange felicities.

This dreamer [he says—and by "this dreamer" he means himself]—this dreamer has encountered some trifling vicissitudes of fortune. When the bank begins to send letters and the butcher to linger at the back gate, he sets to belaboring his brains after a story, for that is his readiest money-winner; and, behold! at once the Little People begin to bestir themselves in the same quest, and labor all night long, and all night long set before him truncheons of tales upon their lighted theatre. . . . How often have these sleepless Brownies done him honest service, and given him, as he sat idly taking his pleasure in the boxes, better tales than he could fashion for himself. Here is one, exactly as it came to him. It seemed he was the son of a very rich and wicked man, the owner of broad acres and a most damnable temper. The dreamer (and that was the son) had lived much abroad, on purpose to avoid his parent; and when at length he returned to England, it was to find him married again to a young wife, who was supposed to suffer cruelly and to loathe her yoke. Because of this marriage (as the dreamer indistinctly understood) it was desirable for father and son to have a meeting; and yet both being proud and both angry, neither would condescend upon a visit. Meet they did accordingly, in a desolate, sandy country by the sea; and there they quarrelled, and the son, stung by some intolerable insult, struck down the father dead. No suspicion was aroused; the dead man was found and buried, and the dreamer succeeded to the broad estates, and found himself installed under the same roof with his father's widow, for whom no provision had been made. These two lived very much alone, as people may after a bereavement, sat down to table together, shared the long evenings, and grew daily better friends; until it seemed to him of a sudden that she was prying about dangerous matters; that she had conceived a notion of his guilt; that she watched him and tried him with questions.

He drew back from her company as men draw back from a precipice suddenly discovered; and yet so strong was the attraction that he would drift again and again into the old intimacy, and again and again be startled back by some suggestive question or some inexplicable meaning in her eye. So they lived at cross-purposes, a life full of broken dialogue, challenging glances, and suppressed passion; until, one day, he saw the woman slipping from the house in a veil, followed her to the station, followed her in the train to the seaside country, and out over the sand-hills to the very place where the murder was done. There she began to grope among the bents, he watching her, flat upon his face; and presently she had something in her hand—I cannot remember what it was, but it was deadly evidence against the dreamer—and as she held it up to look at it, perhaps from the shock of the discovery, her foot slipped, and she hung at some peril on the brink of the tall sandwreaths. He had no thought but to spring up and rescue her; and there they stood face to face, she with that deadly matter openly in her hand—his very presence on the spot another link of proof. It was plain she was about to speak, but this was more than he could bear—he could bear to be lost, but not to talk of it with his destroyer; and he cut her short with trivial conversation. Arm in arm, they returned together to the train, talking he knew not what, made the journey back in the same carriage, sat down to dinner, and passed the evening in the drawing-room as in the past. But suspense and fear drummed in the dreamer's bosom. "She has not denounced me yet"—so his thoughts ran: "when will she denounce me? Will it be to-morrow?" And it was not to-morrow, nor the next day, nor the next; and their life settled back on the old terms, only that she seemed kinder than before, and that, as for him, the burthen of his suspense and wonder grew daily more unbearable, so that he wasted away like a man with a disease. Once, indeed, he broke all bounds of decency, seized an occasion when she was abroad, ransacked her room, and at last, hidden among her jewels, found the damning evidence. There he stood, holding this thing, which was his life, in the hollow of his hand, and marvelling at her inconsequent behavior,—that she should seek, and keep, and yet not use it; and then the door opened, and behold herself! So, once more, they stood, eye to eye, with the evidence between them; and once more she raised to him a face brimming with some communication; and once more he shied away from speech and cut her off. But before he left the room, which he had turned upside-down, he laid back his death-warrant where he had found it; and, at that, her face lighted up. The next thing he heard, she was explaining to her maid, with some ingenious falsehood, the disorder of her

things. Flesh and blood could bear the strain no longer; and I think it was the next morning (though chronology is always hazy in the theatre of the mind) that he burst from his reserve. They had been breakfasting together in one corner of a great, parqueted, sparsely furnished room of many windows; all the time of the meal she had tortured him with sly allusions; and no sooner were the servants gone, and these two protagonists alone together, than he leaped to his feet. She, too, sprang up, with a pale face; with a pale face she heard him as he raved out his complaint: Why did she torture him so? she knew all, she knew he was no enemy to her; why did she not denounce him at once? what signified her whole behavior? why did she torture him? and yet again, why did she torture him? And when he had done, she fell upon her knees, and with outstretched hands: "Do you not understand?" she cried. "I love you!"

An intensely dramatic tale, I venture to think, ladies and gentlemen! one perhaps calculated to shock those who deny to dramatic art the right—in the words of Browning—"to paint man man, whatever the issue"; nevertheless, an intensely dramatic tale. Now, we will not enquire whether we are bound to believe that this highly dramatic story actually came to Stevenson in a dream. No doubt he believed that it did; but perhaps, like ordinary mortals, he unconsciously touched up the dream in the telling, and touched it up with the vivacity of genius. But that is nothing to our purpose. It is certain that in one way or another, whether in his sleeping or his waking moments, the drama I have just recounted to you came into, and came out of, Stevenson's brain; and I fancy you will agree with me that a finer dramatic conception has seldom come out of any brain. Now mark what is his own comment upon it. Having finished the tale, he proceeds: "Here-upon, with a pang of wonder and mercantile delight, the dreamer awoke. His mercantile delight was not of long endurance; for it soon became plain that in this spirited tale there were unmarketable elements; which is just the reason why you have it here so briefly told." I will ask you, ladies and gentlemen, to bear in mind this "mercantile delight," this abandonment of the theme because of its "unmarket-

able elements." To these points we will return later on. Meanwhile the extract I have so lamely recited has, I hope, served its purpose in enabling you to realize beyond all question that Stevenson had in him a large measure of dramatic talent—what I have called the ingredients, the makings, of a dramatist.

Now let me revive in your memory another of Stevenson's essays which throws a curious light upon his mental attitude towards the theatre. I refer to that delightful essay in "Memories and Portraits" called "A Penny Plain and Twopence Colored." It describes, as many of you will remember, his juvenile delight in those sheets of toy-theatre characters which, even when he wrote, had "become, for the most part, a memory," and are now, I believe, almost extinct.

I have at different times [he says] possessed "Aladdin," "The Red Rover," "The Blind Boy," "The Old Oak Chest," "The Wood Demon," "Jack Sheppard," "The Miller and his Men," "The Smuggler," "The Forest of Bondy," "Robin Hood," and "Three-Fingered Jack, the Terror of Jamaica"; and I have assisted others in the illumination of "The Maid of the Inn," and "The Battle of Waterloo."

Then he tells how, in a window in Leith Walk, all the year round,

there stood displayed a theatre in working order, with a "forest set," a "combat," and a few "robbers carousing" in the slides; and below and about, tenfold dearer to me! the plays themselves, those budgets of romance, lay tumbled one upon another. Long and often have I lingered there with empty pockets. One figure, we shall say, was visible in the first plate of characters, bearded, pistol in hand, or drawing to his ear the cloth-yard arrow: I would spell the name: was it Macaire——

one of the subjects, you see, which he afterwards chose for stage treatment

or Long Tom Coffin, or Grindoff, 2d dress? O, how I would long to see the rest! how—if the name by chance were hidden—I would wonder in what play he figured, and what immortal legend justified his attitude and strange apparel!

He then goes on to describe the joy

that attended the coloring of the "penny plain" plates——

nor can I quite forgive [he says] that child who, wilfully foregoing pleasure, stoops to "twopence colored." With crimson lake (hark to the sound of it—crimson lake!—the horns of elfland are not richer on the ear)—with crimson lake and Prussian blue a certain purple is to be compounded which, for cloaks especially, Titian could not equal. The latter color with gamboge, a hated name, though an exquisite pigment, supplied a green of such savory greenness that to-day my heart regrets it. Nor can I recall without a tender weakness the very aspect of the water where I dipped my brush.

All this is delightful—is it not?—deliciously and admirably Stevensonian. The unfortunate thing is that even to his dying day he continued to regard the actual theatre as only an enlarged form of the toy theatres which had fascinated his childhood, he continued to use in his dramatic coloring the crimson lake and Prussian blue of transpontine romance; he considered his function as a dramatist very little more serious than that child's-play with paint-box and pasteboard on which his memory dwelt so fondly. He played at being a playwright; and, ladies and gentleman, he was fundamentally in error in regarding the drama as a matter of child's-play.

Observe, too, that these dramas of the toy theatre were, before they reached the toy theatre, designed for almost the lowest class of theatrical audiences. They were stark and staring melodramas. Most of them were transpontine in the literal sense of the word—that is to say, they had originally seen the light at the humbler theatres beyond the bridges—the Surrey and the Coburg. Many of them were unacknowledged adaptations from the French—for in the early years of the nineteenth century the English dramatist had not acquired that nice conscientiousness which he has since displayed. Yet a drama which was sufficiently popular to be transferred to the toy theatres was almost certain to have a sort of rude merit in its construction. The characterization would be hopelessly conventional, the dialogue bald and despicable—but the

situations would be artfully arranged, the story told adroitly and with spirit. Unfortunately these merits did not come within Stevenson's ken. I don't know whether any one could have discovered them in the text-books issued with the sheets of characters; he, at any rate, did not, for he tells us so. "The fable," he says, "as set forth in the play-book, proved to be not worthy of the scenes and characters. . . . Indeed, as literature, these dramas did not much appeal to me. I forget the very outline of the plots." In other words, what little merit there was in the plays escaped him. What he remembered and delighted in was simply their absurdities—the crude inconsistencies of their characters, the puerilities of their technique. But here we must distinguish. There are two parts of technique, which I may perhaps call its strategy and its tactics. In strategy—in the general laying out of a play, these transpontine dramatists were often, as I have said, more than tolerably skilful: but in tactics, in the art of getting their characters on and off the stage, of conveying information to the audience, and so forth, they were almost incredibly careless and conventional. They would make a man, as in the Chinese theatre, tell the whole story of his life in a soliloquy; or they would expound their plot to the audience in pages of conversation between characters who acquaint each other with nothing that is not already perfectly well known to both. Well, his childish studies accustomed Stevenson to the miserable tactics of these plays. Keenly as he afterwards realized their absurdities, he had nevertheless in a measure become inured to them. For the merits of their strategy, on the other hand, he had naturally, as a mere child, no eye whatever. And one main reason of his inadequate success as a dramatist was that he never either unlearned their tactics or learned their strategy. Had he ever thoroughly understood what was good in them, I have no doubt that, on the basis of this rough-and-ready melodramatic technique, he would have developed a technique of his own as admirable as

that which he ultimately achieved in fiction.

When he first attempts drama, what is the theme he chooses? A story of crime, a story of housebreaking, dark lanterns, jemmies, centre-bits, masks, detectives, boozing-kens—in short a melodrama of the deepest dye, exactly after the Surrey, the Coburg, the toy-theatre type. It evidently pleased him to think that he could put fresh life into this old and puerile form, as he had put, or was soon to put, fresh life into the boy's tale of adventure. And he did, indeed, write a good deal of vivacious dialogue—the literary quality of the play, though poor in comparison with Stevenson's best work, is, of course, incomparably better than that of the models on which he was founding. But unfortunately it shows no glimmer of their stagecraft. The drama is entitled, you remember, "Deacon Brodie, or The Double Life." Its hero is a historical character who held a position of high respectability in eighteenth-century Edinburgh while he devoted his leisure moments to the science and art of burglary. Here was a theme in which Fitzball, or any of the Coburg melodramatists, would indeed have revelled, a theme almost as fertile of melodramatic possibilities as that of "Sweeny Todd, the Barber of Fleet Street." And one would have thought that the future author of "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" was precisely the man to get its full effect out of the "double life" of his burglar hero. But not a bit of it. From sheer lack of stagecraft, the effect of the "double life" is wholly lost. Brodie is a patent, almost undisguised, scoundrel throughout. There is no contrast between the respectable and the criminal sides of his life, no gradual unmasking of his depravity, no piling up, atom by atom, of evidence against him. Our wonder from the first is that any one should ever have regarded him as anything else than the poor blustering, blundering villain he is. From the total ineffectiveness of the character, one cannot but imagine that Stevenson was hampered by the idea of representing strictly the historical personage.

In this, for aught I know, he may have succeeded; but he has certainly not succeeded in making his protagonist interesting in the theatre, or in telling the story so as to extract one tithe of its possibilities of dramatic effect. As for his technique, let one specimen suffice. I will read you one of the many soliloquies: the faulty method of conducting action and revealing character by soliloquy was one from which Stevenson could never emancipate himself. It is a speech delivered by Deacon Brodie while he is making preparations for a midnight gambling excursion.

(Brodie closes, locks, and double-bolts the doors of his bedroom.)

Now for one of the Deacon's headaches! Rogues all, rogues all! (*He goes to the clothes-press and proceeds to change his coat.*) On with the new coat, and into the new life! Down with the Deacon and up with the robber! Eh, God! how still the house is! There's something in hypocrisy after all. If we were as good as we seem, what would the world be? The city has its vizard on, and we—at night we are our naked selves. Trysts are keeping, bottles cracking, knives are stripping; and here is Deacon Brodie flaming forth the man of men he is! How still it is! . . . My father and Mary—Well! the day for them, the night for me; the grimy, cynical night that makes all cats grey, and all honesties of one complexion. Shall a man not have *half* a life of his own? not eight hours out of twenty-four? Eight shall he have should he dare the pit of Tophet. Where's the blunt? I must be cool to-night, or . . . steady, Deacon, you must win, damn you, you must? You must win back the dowry that you've stolen, and marry your sister, and pay your debts, and gull the world a little longer! The Deacon's going to bed—the poor sick Deacon! *Allons!* Only the stars to see me! I'm a man once more till morning.

But it is needless to dwell long on "Deacon Brodie"—ripeness of stagecraft is not to be looked for in a first attempt, a prentice piece. The play is chiefly interesting as exemplifying the boyish spirit of gleeful bravado in which Stevenson approached the stage. Again I say his instinct was to play with it, as he had played, when a boy, with his pasteboard theatre. In "Admiral Guinea"—a much better drama—the influence of his penny-plain-twopence-coloured studies is, if pos-

sible, still more apparent. "Deacon Brodie" was the melodrama of crime; this was to be the nautical melodrama. As the one belonged to the school of "Sweeny Todd," so the other was to follow in the wake of "Black-Ey'd Susan," "The Red Rover," "Ben Backstay," and those other romances of the briny deep in which that celebrated impersonator of seafaring types, T. P. Cooke, had made its fame. If you require a proof of the intimate relation between "Admiral Guinea" and "Skelt's Juvenile Drama," as the toy-theatre plays were called, let me draw your attention to this little coincidence. In his essay on the Juvenile Drama, Stevenson enlarges not only on the sheets of characters, but also on the scenery which accompanied them.

Here is the cottage interior [he writes], the usual first flat, with the cloak upon the nail, the rosaries of onions, the gun and powder-horn and corner cupboard; here is the inn—(this drama must be nautical, I foresee Captain Luff and Bold Bob Bowsprit)—here is the inn with the red curtains, pipes, spittoons, and eight-day clock.

Well now, the two scenes of "Admiral Guinea" reproduce, with a little elaboration, exactly the two scenes here sketched. The first is the cottage interior with the corner cupboard; the second is thus described:

the stage represents the parlor of the Admiral Benbow inn. Fireplace right, with high-backed settles on each side. . . . Tables left, with glasses, pipes, etc. . . . window with red half-curtains; spittoons; candles on both the front tables.

Here, you see, he draws in every detail upon his memories of the toy-theatre. And in writing the play his effort was constantly, and one may almost say confessedly, to reproduce the atmosphere of conventional nautical melodrama—to rehandle its material, while replacing its bald language with dialogue of high literary merit. And of course he succeeded in writing many speeches of great beauty. Take this for instance. It is the scene in the first act between John Gaunt—called "Admiral Guinea"—Kit French, a privateersman, and Gaunt's daughter Ar-

ethusa. Arethusa, you will remember, is the pretty, virtuous maiden of nautical melodrama: Kit, the careless, harem-scarem young sea-dog in love with the virtuous maiden, and desirous, in his weak way, of casting his reckless habits behind him and of becoming a respectable and respected coasting skipper. Gaunt, a vigorously drawn character, was once, I may remind you, captain of a slaver but is no an altered man, harsh, pious, repentant. Gaunt, entering his room, surprises Kit French and his daughter together.

Kit, standing beside Arethusa, her hand in his, says to the father, "Captain Gaunt, I have come to ask you for your daughter." The old man sinks into his chair with a growl.

I love her [says Kit], and she loves me, sir. I've left the privateering. I've enough to set me up and buy a tidy sloop—Jack Lee's; you know the boat, Captain; clinker built, not four years old, eighty tons burthen, steers like a child. I've put my mother's ring on Arethusa's finger; and if you'll give us your blessing, I'll engage to turn over a new leaf, and make her a good husband.

GAUNT.

In whose strength, Christopher French?

KIT.

In the strength of my good, honest love for her: as you did for her mother, and my father for mine. And you know, Captain, a man can't command the wind; but (excuse me, sir) he can always lie the best course possible, and that's what I'll do, so God help me.

GAUNT.

Arethusa, you at least are the child of many prayers; your eyes have been unsealed; and to you the world stands naked, a morning watch for duration, a thing spun of cobwebs for solidity. In the presence of an angry God, I ask you: have you heard this man?

ARETHUSA.

Father, I know Kit, and I love him.

GAUNT.

I say it solemnly, this is no Christian union. To you, Christopher French, I will speak nothing of eternal truths: I will speak to you the language of this world. You have been trained among sinners who gloried in their sin: in your whole life you never saved one farthing; and now, when your pockets are full, you think you can begin, poor dupe, in your own strength. You are a roysterer, a

jovial companion ; you mean no harm—you are nobody's enemy but your own. No doubt you tell this girl of mine, and no doubt you tell yourself, that you can change. Christopher, speaking under correction, I defy you! You ask me for this child of many supplications, for this brand plucked from the burning : I look at you : I read you through and through ; and I tell you—no!

KIT.

Captain Gaunt, if you mean that I am not worthy of her, I'm the first to say so. But, if you'll excuse me, sir, I'm a young man, and young men are no better 'n they ought to be ; it's known ; they're all like that ; and what's their chance? To be married to a girl like this! And would you refuse it to me? Why, sir, you yourself, when you came courting, you were young and rough ; and yet I'll make bold to say that Mrs. Gaunt was a happy woman, and the saving of yourself into the bargain. Well, now, Captain Gaunt, will you deny another man, and that man a sailor, the very salvation that you had yourself?

GAUNT.

Salvation, Christopher French, is from above.

KIT.

Well, sir, that is so ; but there's means, too ; and what means so strong as the wife a man has to strive and toil for, and that bears the punishment whenever he goes wrong? Now, sir, I've spoke with your old shipmates in the Guinea trade. Hard as nails, they said, and true as the compass ; as rough as a slaver but as just as a judge. Well, sir, you hear me plead : I ask you for my chance ; don't you deny it to me.

GAUNT.

You speak of me? In the true balances we both weigh nothing. But two things I know : the death of iniquity, how foul it is ; and the agony with which a man repents. Not until seven devils were cast out of me did I awake ; each rent me as it passed. Ay, that was repentance. Christopher, Christopher, you have sailed before the wind since first you weighed your anchor, and now you think to sail upon a bowline? You do not know your ship, young man : you will go to le'ward like a sheet of paper ; I tell you so that know—I tell you so that have tried, and failed, and wrestled in the sweat of prayer, and at last, at last, have tasted grace. But, meanwhile, no flesh and blood of mine shall lie at the mercy of such a wretch as I was then, or as you are this day. I could not own the deed before the face of heaven, if I sanctioned this unequal yoke. Arethusa, pluck off that ring from off your finger! Christopher French, take it, and go hence!

KIT.

Arethusa, what do you say?

ARETHUSA.

O Kit, you know my heart. But he is alone, and I am his only comfort ; and I owe all to him ; and shall I not obey my father? But, Kit, if you will let me, I will keep your ring. Go, Kit ; go, and prove to my father that he was mistaken ; go and win me. And O, Kit, if ever you should weary, come to me—no, do not come! but send word—and I shall know all, and you shall have your ring.

KIT.

Don't say that, don't say such things to me ; I sink or swim with you. Old man, you've struck me hard ; give me a good word to go with. Name your time ; I'll stand the test. Give me a spark of hope, and I'll fight through for it. Say just this,—“ Prove I was mistaken,”—and, by George! I'll prove it.

GAUNT.

(*Looking up.*) I make no such compacts. Go, and swear not at all.

Again, take the scene between David Pew, the ruffianly blind beggar, once Boatswain of the *Arethusa*, who, armed with the knowledge of Gaunt's past, comes to his old captain to extort money from him. They stand face to face. “ Well?” says Gaunt. “ Well, Cap'n?” says Pew. “ What do you want?” asks Gaunt.

PEW.

Well, Admiral, in a general way, what I want in a manner of speaking is money and rum.

GAUNT.

David Pew, I have known you a long time.

PEW.

And so you have ; aboard the old *Arethusa* ; and you don't seem that cheered up as I'd look for, with an old shipmate dropping in, one as has been seeking you two years and more—and blind at that. What a swaller you had for a pannikin of rum, and what a fist for the shiners ! Ah, Cap'n, they did n't call you Admiral Guinea for nothing. I can see that old sea-chest of yours—her with the brass bands, where you kept your gold-dust and doubloons : you know!—I can see her as well this minute as though you and me was still at it playing put on the lid of her. . . . You don't say nothing, Cap'n? . . . Well, here it is : I want money and I want rum. You don't know what it is to want rum, you don't : it gets to that p'int, that you would kill a 'ole ship's company for just

one guttle of it. What? Admiral Guinea, my old Commander, go back on poor old Pew? and him high and dry?

GAUNT.

David Pew, it were better for you that you were sunk in fifty fathom. I know your life; and first and last, it is one broadside of wickedness. You were a porter in a school, and beat a boy to death; you ran for it, turned slaver, and shipped with me, a green hand. Ay, that was the craft for you: that was the right craft, and I was the right captain; there was none worse that sailed to Guinea. Well, what came of that? In five years' time you made yourself the terror and abhorrence of your mess-mates. The worst hands detested you; your captain—that was me, John Gaunt, the chief of sinners—cast you out for a Jonah. Ay, you were a scandal to the Guinea coast, from Lagos down to Calabar; and when at last I sent you ashore, a marooned man—your shipmates, devils as they were, cheering and rejoicing to be quit of you—by heaven! it was a ton's weight off the brig.

PEW.

Cap'n Gaunt, Cap'n Gaunt, these are ugly words.

GAUNT.

What next? You shipped with Flint the Pirate. What you did then I know not; the deep seas have kept the secret; kept it, ay, and will keep against the Great Day. God smote you with blindness, but you heeded not the sign. That was His last mercy; look for no more. To your knees, man, and repent! Pray for a new heart; flush out your sins with tears; flee while you may from the terrors of the wrath to come.

PEW.

Now, I want this clear: Do I understand that you're going back on me, and you'll see me damned first?

GAUNT.

Of me you shall have neither money nor strong drink: not a guinea to spend in riot; not a drop to fire your heart with devilry.

PEW.

Cap'n, do you think it wise to quarrel with me? I put it to you now, Cap'n, fairly as between man and man—do you think it wise?

GAUNT.

I fear nothing. My feet are on the Rock. Be gone!

The play is full of speeches as beautiful as those I have just read you of Gaunt's; and if beautiful speeches, and even beautiful passages of dialogue,

made a good drama, "Admiral Guinea" would indeed be a great success. But what chiefly strikes one after seeing or reading the play is that Stevenson's idea of dramatic writing was that fine speeches, and fine speeches alone, would carry everything before them. I can picture the collaborators sitting together and discussing the composition of their work, and saying to each other, "This position, or that, will furnish a capital opportunity for a good speech"; I can imagine Stevenson subsequently telling his friend what a splendid "speech" he had just written. In short, "Admiral Guinea" is mainly rhetoric, beautifully done but with no blood in it. The second act—the inn scene—is a monument of long-windedness; while the situation of Gaunt's walking in his sleep—by which Stevenson's friends and admirers, on the occasion of the production of the play in London, set such store—could be cut out of the drama bodily for any bearing it has upon the development of the story or the bringing about of the *dénouement*. I was a witness of the single performance of this piece in London and can testify to the ineffectiveness of its representation.

In "Beau Austin" we have certainly Stevenson's nearest approach to an effective drama. In spite of its inacceptable theme, it is a charming play and really interesting on the stage. A little more careful handling of the last act might have rendered it wholly successful. But still we see traces of the old crudity of technique of the toy-theatre, and still the author evidently conceived that the essence of the drama resides in rhetoric, in fine speeches. How artless, for instance, is the scene of exposition between the heroine's aunt, Miss Foster, and the maid, Barbara, in which half the time Miss Foster is telling Barbara things she knows perfectly well already, and the other half saying things she would never have said to a maid. Then, when it comes to revealing to us the recesses of Dorothy's heart, what do the authors do? They make her speak a solid page and a half of soliloquy—exquisitely composed, but, again, how rhetori-

cal, how undramatic! So elegant is this soliloquy that I cannot refrain from murdering it for your benefit. You remember the position—Dorothy Musgrave is hugging a terrible secret to her breast, her betrayal by George Frederick Austin, the "Beau Austin" of the play. She has just received a letter from John Fenwick, an old and faithful lover, and her aunt has been upbraiding the girl on account of her declared determination never to marry. Dorothy, left alone, says:

How she tortures me, poor aunt, my poor blind aunt! and I—I could break her heart with a word. That she should see nothing, know nothing—there 's where it kills. O, it is more than I can bear . . . and yet, how much less than I deserve! Mad girl, of what do I complain? that this dear, innocent woman still believes me good, still pierces me to the soul with trustfulness. Alas! and were it otherwise, were her dear eyes opened to the truth, what were left me but death? He, too—she must still be praising him, and every word is a lash upon my conscience. If I could die of my secret: if I could cease—but one moment cease—this living lie; if I could sleep and forget and be at rest! (*She reads John Fenwick's letter.*) Poor John! He at least is guiltless; and yet for my fault he too must suffer, he too must bear part in my shame. Poor John Fenwick! Has he come back with the old story: with what might have been, perhaps, had we stayed by Edenside? Eden? Yes, my Eden, from which I fell. O my old north country, my old river—the river of my innocence, the old country of my hopes—how could I endure to look on you now? And how to meet John?—John, with the old love on his lips, the old, honest, innocent, faithful heart? There was a Dorothy once who was not unfit to ride with him, her heart as light as his, her life as clear as the bright rivers we forded; he called her his Diana, he crowned her so with rowan. Where is that Dorothy now? that Diana? [she that was everything to John? For, O, I did him good; I know I did him good; I will still believe I did him good; I made him honest and kind and a true man; alas, and could not guide myself! And now, how will he despise me! For he shall know; if I die, he shall know all; I could not live, and not be true with him.

She produces a necklace which she has discovered in the possession of the maid, a necklace with which the woman has been bribed by Beau Austin as an inducement to her to keep out of the way upon a certain occasion. Dorothy contemplates the trinket and says:

That he should have bought me from my maid! George, George, that you should have stooped to this! Basely as you have used me, this is the basest. Perish the witness! (*She throws the thing to the ground and treads on it.*) Break, break like my heart, break like my hopes, perish like my good name!

Poorly as I render this soliloquy, you cannot, I think, fail to perceive its extreme gracefulness. Even finer, because it is more naturally introduced, and therefore more dramatic, is an earlier speech of Dorothy's wherein she turns almost fiercely upon her aunt who has, in ignorance, been praising Beau Austin for his gallantries. "Stop!" cries the girl,

Aunt Evelina, stop! I cannot endure to hear you. What is he, after all, but just Beau Austin? What has he done, with half a century of good health—what has he done that is either memorable or worthy? Diced and danced and set fashions; vanquished is a drawing-room, fought for a word; what else? As if these were the meaning of life! Do not make me think so poorly of all of us women. Sure, we can rise to admire a better kind of man than Mr. Austin. We are not all to be snared with the eye, dear aunt; and those that are—O! I know not whether I more hate or pity them.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is not my intention to trouble you with any further extracts from this play. I should, I fear, lay myself open to a charge of unfairness by quoting scenes with the sole object of proving their ineffectiveness, even tediousness. I ask you to turn, at your leisure, to "Beau Austin" and to study the play for yourselves. I ask you to read the passages—some of them great passages—of dialogue between Dorothy and Fenwick, between Fenwick and Beau Austin, between the Beau and Dorothy; and I submit to you that while there is much in these passages that is beautiful, much that is true and subtle, there is very little that is truly and subtly expressed. The beauty the authors aimed at was, I believe you will agree with me, the absolute beauty of words, such beauty as Ruskin or Pater or Newman might achieve in an eloquent passage, not the beauty of dramatic fitness to the character of the situation.

Now, I am not attacking—and I should be sorry if you so understood me—that poetical convention which reigns, for instance, in our great Elizabethan drama. I am not claiming any absolute and inherent superiority for our modern realistic technique, though I do not think it quite so inferior as some critics would have us believe. But what I do say is that the dramatist is bound to select his particular form of technique, master, and stick to it. He must not jumble up two styles and jump from one to the other. This is what the authors of "Beau Austin" have not realized. Their technique is neither ancient nor modern; their language is neither poetry nor prose—the prose, that is to say, of conceivable human life. The period has nothing to do with it. People spoke, no doubt, a little more formally in 1820 than they do to-day; but neither then nor at any time was the business of life, even in its most passionate moments, conducted in pure oratory. I say, then, that even in "Beau Austin," far superior though it be to his other plays, Stevenson shows that he had not studied and realized the conditions of the problem he was handling—the problem of how to tell a dramatic story truly, convincingly, and effectively on the modern stage—the problem of disclosing the workings of the human heart by methods which shall not destroy the illusion which a modern audience expects to enjoy in the modern theatre.

Perhaps you will tell me that the fault lay in some part, not with Stevenson, but with the modern audience. I do not maintain that an individual audience never makes mistakes, or even that the theatrical public in general is a miracle of high intelligence. But I assert unhesitatingly that the instinct by which the public feels that one form of drama, and not another, is what best satisfies its intellectual and spiritual needs at this period or at that is a natural and justified instinct. Fifty years hence the formula of to-day will doubtless be as antiquated and ineffective as the formula of fifty years ago; but it is imposed by a natural

fitness upon the dramatist of to-day, just as, if he wants to travel long distances, he must be content to take the railway train, and cannot either ride in a stage-coach or fly in an air-ship. As a personal freak, of course, he may furnish up a stage-coach, or construct—at his risk and peril—an air-ship. Such freaks occur in the dramatic world from time to time, and are often interesting—sometimes, but very rarely, successful. "Deacon Brodie" and "Admiral Guinea" are what I may perhaps describe as stage-coach plays—deliberate attempts to revive an antiquated form. But "Beau Austin" is not even that. It is a costume play, I admit; but its methods are fundamentally and essentially modern. The misfortune is that the authors had not studied and mastered the formula they were attempting to use, but were forever falling back, without knowing it, upon a bygone formula, wholly incongruous with the matter of their play and the manner in which alone it could be presented in the theatre of their day.

Many authors, of course, have deliberately written plays "for the study," ignoring—or more often, perhaps, affecting to ignore—the possibility of stage presentation. But this was not Stevenson's case; nor did he pretend that it was. Listen to this passage from Mr. Graham Balfour's charmingly written life of his cousin and friend:

Meanwhile the first two months at Bournemouth were spent chiefly in the company of Mr. Henley and were devoted to collaboration over two new plays. The reception of "Deacon Brodie" had been sufficiently promising to serve as an incentive to write a piece which should be a complete success, and so to grasp some of the rewards which now seemed within reach of the authors. They had never affected to disregard the fact that in this country the prizes of the dramatist are out of all proportion to the payment of the man of letters; and already in 1883 Stevenson had written to his father: "The theatre is the gold mine"; and on that I must keep an eye."

Now let me recall to your mind, in this connection, the "mercantile delight" which Stevenson professes to have felt in the dream-drama enacted by the

"Brownies of his brain." How exactly that chimes in with his own remark to his father, and with his biographer's frank avowal of the motive which inspired his collaboration with Mr. Henley. Ladies and gentlemen, I am the last to pretend that it is a disgrace to an artist to desire an adequate, an ample pecuniary reward for his labors. That is not at all my point. I draw your attention to these passages for two reasons. Firstly because they put out of court, once for all, any conjecture that in play-writing Stevenson obeyed a pure artistic ideal, and had no taste or ambition for success on the stage. Secondly, I draw your attention to them in order to indicate an unexpressed but clearly implied fallacy that underlies them. When Stevenson says, "The theatre is the gold mine," and when Mr. Graham Balfour tells us that Stevenson felt that "the prizes of the dramatist are out of all proportion to the payment of the man of letters," the implication obviously is that the gold mine can be easily worked, that the prizes are disproportionate to the small amount of pains necessary in order to grasp them. That was evidently the belief of these two men of distinguished talent; and that was precisely where they made the mistake. The art of drama, in its higher forms, is not, and can never be, easy; nor are such rewards as fall to it in any way out of proportion to the sheer mental stress it involves. No amount of talent, of genius, will, under modern conditions at any rate, enable the dramatist to dispense with a concentration of thought, a sustained intensity of mental effort, very different, if I may venture to say so, from the exertion demanded in turning out an ordinary novel. Stevenson's novels were not ordinary, and I do not for a moment imply that the amount of mental effort which produced, say, "The Master of Ballantrae," might not, if well directed, have produced a play of equal value. But Stevenson was never at the trouble of learning how to direct it well. On the contrary, he wholly ignored the necessity for so doing. What attracted him to the drama was precisely the

belief that he 'could turn out a good play with far less mental effort than it cost him to write a good novel; and here he was radically, wofully, in error. And the inadequate success of his plays, instead of bringing his mistake home to him, merely led him, I am afraid, to condemn the artistic medium which he had failed to acquire.

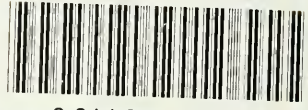
Towards the end of his life, while he was in Samoa, and years after his collaboration with Mr. Henley had come to a close, it seems to have been suggested by his friends at home that he should once more try his hand at drama; for we find him writing to Mr. Colvin: "No, I will not write a play for Irving, nor for the devil. Can you not see that the work of *falsification* which a play demands is of all tasks the most ungrateful? And I have done it a long while—and nothing ever came of it." It is true—it is fatally true—that he had devoted himself in his dramatic ventures to "the work of falsification"; but that was, I repeat, because he misconceived entirely the problem before him. The art—the great and fascinating and most difficult art—of the modern dramatist is nothing else than to achieve that *compression* of life which the stage undoubtedly demands *without* falsification. If Stevenson had ever mastered that art—and I do not question that if he had properly conceived it he had it in him to master it—he might have found the stage a gold mine, but he would have found, too, that it is a gold mine which cannot be worked in a smiling, sportive, half-contemptuous spirit, but only in the sweat of the brain, and with every mental nerve and sinew strained to its uttermost. He would have known that no ingots are to be got out of this mine, save after sleepless nights, days of gloom and discouragement, and other days, again, of feverish toil, the result of which proves in the end to be misapplied and has to be thrown to the winds. When you sit in your stall at the theatre and see a play moving across the stage, it all seems so easy and so natural, you feel as though the author had improvised it. The characters, being, let us hope, ordinary

human beings, say nothing very remarkable, nothing, you think,—thereby paying the author the highest possible compliment,—that might not quite well have occurred to *you*. When you take up a playbook (if ever you *do* take one up) it strikes you as being a very trifling thing—a mere insubstantial pamphlet beside the imposing bulk of the latest six-shilling novel. Little do you guess that every page of the play has cost more care, severer mental tension, if not more actual manual labor, than any chapter of a novel, though it be fifty pages long. It is the height of the author's art, according to the old maxim, that the ordinary

spectator should never be clearly conscious of the skill and travail that have gone to the making of the finished product. But the artist who would achieve a like feat must realize its difficulties, or what are his chances of success? Stevenson, with all his genius, made the mistake of approaching the theatre as a toy to be played with. The facts of the case were against him, for the theatre is not a toy; and, facts being stubborn things, he ran his head against them in vain. Had he only studied the conditions, or, in other words got into a proper relation to the facts, with what joy should we have acclaimed him among the masters of the modern stage!



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